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The Catastrophe

A BALLAD

BY F. C. JACOBUS

Toronto, Canada, 1907

It was a dark midwinter day,
When indoor plans we frame,
In that great City of the West,
With strange-derived name.

Beneath a gorgeous, bossy roof,
With frescoed walls around
And all for pleasure's end, that can
In pandering brains be found.

Two thousand souls had gathered there,
A merry sport to see;
The wives and daughters of the town
And males from business free.

Young mothers there, with brighter
Than home, alas! eer sees, [smiles,
And sweet, small girls, with winning
That every person please. [ways

A happy, merry, many here
This last day of the year,
Ah, destined never to out live
The turning of the sphere.

T'was in the midst of all the mirth,
When every frown was broke,
A man strode to the foot-lights glare,
And tremulous he spoke—

“My friends, gentlemen, ladies, all
 Make for the outer air;
A dangerous fire is here behind,
 There is small time to spare.”

Then fell the fireproof, mineral wall,
 At his command loud cry’d,
But unkind chance ! it sudden stopped,
 And half way down stood tied !

Man could no more : the flames hot
 Gave him short time to flee, [breath
Followed his fellows with wild haste
 The great port gaping free.

These things took not one minutes’ space
 When Vulcan’s tongues had found,
Imprisoned gas in mighty tanks,
 And compassd them around.

Then came a dreadful thundering sound
 That blanched every face;
The building was almost unroofed,
 And trembled to its base.

And a prodigious tongue, like form
 Of flame that moment flew,
As from a mouth, with a great leap,
 The mighty stage door through.

Oh, God ! the fearful scene that then
 Took place within those walls
In semi-darkness, heat and smoke,—
 T’was one of Pluto’s halls.

The appallid people, (those unscathed
By that fell flame and heat,)
Toward the exit portals then
Fled with fear winged feet.

Alas, Alas ! for poor all they;
Alas, alas ! for woe,
Alas, alas ! for such a place,
Why to it did they go?

It was a trap: the upward slope,
And seat-backs ranged across,
Like barbed wire lines before a fort
Of many souls the loss.

And when at last a goodly crowd
The fatal ports had found,
With fear, and wounds, and toil, were
Past patience's last bound. [driven

The blissful happy street before
The eyes of every mind,
And a discharging magazine
Of Vulcan's plagues behind.

Some fell, and so they strove to rise;
Were trodden down like dirt;
A senseless, stumbling, selfish mob.
Without one generous heart.

The ways to life were soon thus choked
With struggling flesh and blood,
As fills the turbine's tunnel dark
Niagara's boiling flood.

How many fair and lovely girls
Were here deprived of breath,
With piteous wail were trampled down
To an untimely death !

What thoughts had some in that dread
Deep down among the rest, [strife
Struggling, smothering, fighting, dying,
Can be imagined best.

But, oh, we may be sure that they,
In anguished black despair,
Breathed out a dreadful curse upon
That fair appearing snare.

And when at last this monster fell
This inanimate shark,
Its entrails ripped—what gruesome glut
Lay in its belly dark ?

As if that place had been a mill
To thresh out life from clay;
So, there, in hideous posture heaped,
Thrice ten score victims lay.

Oh, Death ! thou wert too busy here,
And forward with thy steel;
How many tender heart-cords here
Thy iron wrench did feel !

